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ON THE UNITY OF *INTEGER VITAE*

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Probably the writer of this familiar poem would have been both interested and surprised, could he have known how much discussion and what diversity of opinion as to its meaning would be evoked in the years to come.

Perusal of even a part of the literature of the subject leaves the impression that the critics are in hopelessly divided camps. For the argument offered in support of several analyses is at least worthy of consideration; and we lack the data essential to a definite and final settlement of the matter. It all depends upon the circumstances that led to the writing of the poem, and upon the specific background in the author's mind; and these are matters for speculation merely.

About a decade ago Professors Hendrickson and Shorey discussed the poem from divergent angles in the *Classical Journal*,¹ and numerous references to the literature of the subject may be found in those articles. It will be noted there that some scholars feel that the poem lacks sadly in unity. Indeed it has been proposed to mend matters by excising certain verses; and so conservative a scholar as Munro is quoted as follows:

This ode is certainly not in my judgment one of Horace's best. I see no inward bond of connection between the four first most prosaic stanzas one with the other nor between them and the last two: and the wolf, more terrible than any lion or wild boar, savors more of nervousness than of inspiration.

This verdict certainly is too sweeping; and it is the purpose of the present brief paper to point out a thread of connection that seems to run through the first stanzas of the poem. The idea to be presented possibly is implicit in Kiesssling's notes on the ode. But the scanty information he provides is introduced much in the

¹ V, 250 ff. and 317 ff.

manner of incidental comment, and the important application is not made.

First of all, it is very likely that the word *venenatis* of line 3 in the first stanza of the poem carried a suggestion for Roman readers that does not strike us so readily. The general silence of the editors as to the choice of this word seems to indicate that they see in it merely an example of Horace's tendency to heighten the effect by the selection of a telling and appropriate epithet, poisoned arrows being more deadly than any other variety.

Yet, if this was Horace's intention here, it is only fair to note that, in the matter of defending one's self against a sudden and dangerous attack, poisoned arrows would halt a charge no more effectively than would the ordinary variety.¹ It may be objected at this point that such a prosaic criterion should not be applied to poetic composition; but Horace usually is careful in the selection of his epithets; and, other things being equal, we may assume that he is running true to form here.

More important, however, is the attitude of the Romans generally toward the use of poisoned weapons in contests between men; and it is significant that writers on war say so little on the subject. Thus, in the writing of Caesar and his continuators, not a single case is sighted of any of the following words: *venenum*, *veneno*, *venenatus*, and *toxicum*. On the other hand, Cicero's philosophical works show one such instance of *venenato telo*, in connection with the well-worn story of Ptolomaeus and Alexander,² the wound there in question being suffered in India during a battle with barbarians. Elsewhere we read of other "heathen" who stooped to such practices, e.g., the Scythians,³ Arab pirates,⁴ and dwellers in Asia Minor.⁵

¹ It is true that the elder Pliny (*N.H.* xi. 53. 279) picked up a marvelous tale of poisoned weapons so deadly that the victim was struck down instantly by the force of the venom. But the normal course of nature in such cases is better reflected in the passages of the same writer in which he prescribes remedies to be used by the victims of poisoned shafts, e.g., *ibid.* xxii. 23. 103, xxviii. 8. 120, etc.

² *De Div.* ii. 66. 135.

³ Pliny *N.H.*, *loc. cit.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, vi. 29. 176; *cf.* Sen. *Med.* 711.

⁵ Ovid *Ex Pont.* iv. 7. 11.

But we are not left to mere inference as to the Roman attitude toward the use of poison in fights between men. In the introduction to his discussion of fruits and flowers, the elder Pliny takes occasion to point out in rather caustic language that mankind has fallen far below the level of the brute creation in resorting to such expedients as poisoning weapons and polluting water courses:

N.H. xviii. 1. 2: *Nostris eam (terram) criminibus urguemus nostramque culpam illi imputamus. Genuit venena. Sed quis invenit illa praeter hominem? Cavere ac refugere alitibus ferisque satis est . . . ; quod tamen eorum excepto homine et tela sua venenis tinguit? Nos et sagittas tinguimus ac ferro ipsi nocentius aliquid damus, nos et flumina inficimus, . . . ipsumque quo vivitur in perniciem vertimus.*

Of Scythian practices in particular he speaks in even stronger terms:

N.H. xi. 53. 279: *Scytha sagittas tingunt viperina sanie et humano sanguine. Irremediable id scelus; mortem ilico adfert levi tactu.*

Here the strong expression *scelus* may be explained in part on the ground of the charm implied in the admixture of human blood; but clearly the writer means to stamp this irregular type of warfare as unfair—or worse.

Cicero's orations show a single and significant example of *venenatum telum* used in this connection:

p. Quinctio 2. 8: *Ita fit, ut ego, qui tela depellere et vulneribus mederi debeam, tum id facere cogar, cum etiam telum adversarius nullum iecerit, illis autem tempus impugnandi detur, cum et vitandi illorum impetus potestas adempta nobis erit et, si qua in re, id quod parati sunt facere, falsum crimen quasi *venenatum aliquod telum* iecerint, medicinae facienda locus non erit.*

By such words the use of poisoned weapons against men is branded as unfair and dishonorable.

The bearing of these remarks upon the matter in hand is obvious; for, in speaking of a man really *integer vitae scelerisque purus*, it would be incongruous, to say the least, even to suggest as a possibility his use of means of defense that are irregular and unfair—not to say *scelus*, a taint from which he is declared free. By a process of exclusion, therefore, the Roman reader would catch the suggestion that the dangers to be faced with impunity are to

be met in the haunts of man-eating wild beasts, for the extermination of which poison might legitimately be used.¹

If this analysis is correct, *venenatis* of the third line of the poem is not a mere "picturesque" epithet conveying the notion of "deadly," but a clear hint that the dangers to be apprehended are from ravenous beasts. And the effect of the hint is heightened by *fabulosus* of line 3 of the following stanza; for all agree that the stories regarding the vague and far-off land referred to in the text concern strange and awful unknown monsters.

With this preparation, the Roman reader would scarcely be surprised by the introduction of the huge and savage wolf of stanzas 3 and 4, whose entrance into the poem has so much troubled the commentators. In fact, on this basis everything falls into line, and there is no such lack of connection as Munro and others have thought.

The present paper rests at this point. But it may be added that the considerations here adduced fit very well with the interpretation of the poem as jesting throughout; for the early hint that the character of the man who is *integer vitae scelerisque purus* will serve as a guard to stop the mouths of (actual) lions would seem incompatible with seriousness of purpose on the part of the writer. On the other hand, the argument for unity would still have a place in connection with Professor Hendrickson's divergent view as to the nature of the poem as a whole.

¹ In this connection there is an interesting passage in Cicero, *De Nat. Deo.* ii. 50. 126, in which reference is made to poisoning panthers, and to the use of poisoned arrows in hunting wild goats on Crete. As to the second item, Mayor accepts an emendation, on the ground that there are no dangerous animals on Crete requiring poisoned weapons for their extermination, also that poisoned weapons would spoil game. As to this last, the elder Pliny has a curious note (*N.H.* xxv. 5. 61) in which he reports that the Gauls thought the flesh of animals killed by poisoned weapons superior, and that they discarded only the part nearest the wound.